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Work as Transcendental Experience: Implications of Dejours' Psycho- dynamics for Contemporary Social Theory and Philosophy

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Abstract: This essay discusses four books recently published by Christophe Dejours with the aim of extracting their most significant social-theoretical and philosophical implications. The first two books are two contributions by Dejours in current debates and public policy initiatives in France through the application of his psychodynamic approach to work-related issues (work and violence; work and suicide). Even though these texts are shaped by the specific contexts in which they were written, they also contain broader social-theoretical insights that are quite significant. In the other two books, the two volumes of his major summation *Travail vivant*,¹ Dejours makes explicit the fundamental theoretical foundation upon which his psychodynamic approach is based. I will attempt to demonstrate that these books have significant implications for contemporary social theory and philosophy, notably as they establish the indissoluble continuity between the corporeal and cognitive capacities of the human subject, and the importance of this insight for moral and political reflection.

Keywords: Dejours, work, Freud, psychoanalysis, emancipation.

A spate of dramatic events in France in the last few years has lifted the veil over the general deterioration of working life and drawn attention to the heavy psychic cost of new methods of management.² As a result of these

1. Christophe Dejours, *Travail vivant*, 2 volumes (vol. 1: *Sexualité et travail*, vol.2: *Travail et émancipation*, Paris: Payot, 2009).

2. A number of spectacular industrial suicides, in some of France's most successful international companies, notably Renault and France Telecom, have shocked public opinion and greatly shifted perception on the reality of contemporary work. Reports from other countries suggest

alarming developments, the work of Christophe Dejours has been taken up widely by French and international media in the last year. He has given numerous interviews to major national and international news services; he appears regularly in specialized and generalist French media to discuss the situation of work. All this attention given recently to Dejours is the result of his research of more than three decades dedicated to the relationships between work and mental health. Today, Dejours is without a doubt the most eminent specialist in France and one of the foremost international experts in issues of health and work.

Next to his expertise as a clinician and practitioner, his theoretical work, articulated in his “psychodynamic” approach to work, has also become a key reference for a number of research programmes in the social sciences. Today, ergonomists and other psychologists of work, but also sociologists, economists, researchers in accounting, social and political philosophers, mobilize arguments drawn from the psychodynamics of work in their own research. It is a hallmark of Dejours’ work that the theoretical reflections he has developed in order to support his practice as a clinician have also consistently appealed in reciprocal fashion to researchers in other disciplines. Whilst his reflection as a psychologist of work was always nourished by arguments drawn from disciplines such as philosophy or sociology, these disciplines embraced in return many of his theoretical insights.

This productive loop between the practical and the theoretical, which mobilizes a number of disciplines in its movement, has been substantially strengthened and broadened in the writings published in the last few years. A number of these publications are addressed first to health professionals active in the sphere of work (psychologists and “*médecins du travail*”). However, they all contain new theoretical insights that advance the psychodynamics of work and will undoubtedly impact again on other fields of social-scientific research. Next to these publications, Dejours has also recently published a two volume summation of his thought, entitled *Travail vivant* (*Living Work*), which constitutes his most ambitious attempt to date to make explicit the philosophical and anthropological foundations underpinning his bold claims about the centrality of work. With this major diptych, Dejours now explicitly enters the stage as a social and political philosopher in his own right. This review of his latest publications will focus mainly on this

that, even though the rate of industrial suicide in France might be comparatively high, the general trend of a rise in work-related stress and depression is not limited to the French situation. For a recent example from the medical literature, see Maria Melchior *et al.*, “Work Stress precipitates Depression and Anxiety in Young, Working Women and Men”, *Psychological Medicine* 37 (2007): 1119–129.

book, as it is bound to become a major contribution to the social sciences in years to come. First, though, I will turn briefly to the other publications of the last two years, focusing on the fresh theoretical insights they bring to social and political philosophy.

1. Work and Violence

Conjuring Violence: Work, Violence, Health is the final report from the work of a commission presided over by Dejours in the second half of 2005. The commission was one of five set up by the French Ministry of Health in preparation for a set of public policy initiatives³ that were being prepared in response to a major World Health Organization report in 2002 on the impact of violence upon health.⁴ In the first part of *Conjuring Violence*, Dejours sets up the key theoretical arguments framing the reports and interviews detailed in the second part. These reports stem from clinicians documenting cases of violence at work and the impact of violence on individuals' physical and mental health. Like all of Dejours' texts, beyond the diagnostic and the practical, the book offers strong theoretical insights with major potential implications for other disciplinary interests.

First, we find a good summary of the main theses of the psychodynamic approach.⁵

a. Definition of Work

The definition of work that Dejours operates with is the following: "the activity deployed by men and women in order to achieve the objectives determined by the prescriptions of a hierarchy or by the terms of a contract".⁶ Implicit in this definition is the crucial fact, highlighted by ergonomic studies of the working activity, that the organization of work can never anticipate the complete, concrete reality of the working situation. In the reality of work, there is always a gap between the prescribed and the actual, between

3. See an English version of the final report at: http://www.sante.gouv.fr/htm/actu/violence_sante/rapport_anglais.pdf

4. World Health Organization, "World Report on Violence and Health" (Geneva: WHO, 2002).

5. For a detailed presentation from the perspective of social theory, see my "Work and the Precarisation of Existence", *European Journal of Social Theory* 11(4) (2008): 443–63. For a presentation from the perspective of the philosophy of work, see my "What is Work? Key Insights from the Psychodynamics of Work", *Thesis Eleven* 98 (2009): 69–87.

6. Dejours, *Conjurer la violence*, 15.

the task and the actual activity. A definition of work that takes into consideration this structural feature cannot therefore consider only the production of outputs. It must focus on the actual activity that working agents deploy in order to bridge the gap between the prescriptions and their actual implementation. The multiple factors preventing the direct implementation of rules and procedures make up what Dejours simply calls the “real of work”. The term has no special Lacanian connotation. Rather it points to the simple, “ergonomic” fact that no plan, programme or set of regulations can actually anticipate what it will take to make the productive act succeed. This concept of the real plays a major role in Dejours’ thesis of the centrality of work. Indeed, as we shall see, it acquires a sort of metaphysical value in *Travail vivant*.

b. *Psychic Identity as Fragile Construct*

The second key premise of Dejours’ psychodynamics of work, stemming directly from his clinical study of work-related and other mental pathologies over several decades, relates to the definition of mental health and subjective identity. Accordingly, mental health:

is not conceived as a ‘state’ (of physical, psychic and social well-being) but rather as an ideal... Health understood as an ideal means that subjective attitudes and behaviour are directed towards achieving the best balance possible between physical and mental functions. ... When a stable compromise is reached, it is always the result of a *struggle*, against pathogenic factors (endogenous and exogenous), and against the pathological processes that these factors risk triggering or entertaining.⁷

This definition of mental health explains the term “psychodynamic”. Subjective identity is seen as an unstable compromise, always evolving and on the verge of destabilization by internal, organic and mental forces, as well as by external agents. The key metaphors that capture this basic view of subjective identity are: psychic economic or psychic architecture.

These two key premises already explain why Dejours argues for the psychological centrality of work. Since work for him is intrinsically a challenge to subjective capacities and since subjectivity is defined as being structurally vulnerable, the intrinsic constitutive, twofold character of work follows immediately. Because of the rigidity and complexity involved in the pre-

7. Dejours, *Conjurer la violence*, 14.

scriptive dimension of any work, of all the types of human action work is the one in which subjective economies are tested in the most rigorous manner. In good cases, when the gap between the prescriptive and the actual is overcome through successful working, the subjective construct comes out strengthened. The psychic economy is bolstered by the experience of successful work. Dejours refers to it as the “transformative power” (*puissance mutative*) of work. But when the real of work is too obstreperous, which can be the result of technical obstacles (recalcitrant machines for instance), but also of social or organizational factors (dysfunctional collectives or hierarchies, unrealistic expectations or ill-conceived work processes), then the subjective constructs are in danger. Work is both an opportunity and a threat for mental health.

The structuring effects of work upon personality depend upon organizational constraints. Some forms of work that are rigidly organized can have de-structuring effects upon personality, whereas others make room for ‘organisational autonomy’ and are potentially favourable to the construction of mental health.⁸

c. *Work, Recognition and Subjectivity*

A third structural factor remains to be mentioned, namely the role played by recognition. Inherent in the link between working activity and subjective construct lies the structural possibility of suffering. All work is, to some extent, a challenge to body and mind. According to Dejours, the sense that this suffering has for the subjective economy depends on the recognition of the subject’s work. When working efforts are recognized, through the wage notably, but also through symbolic gestures of acknowledgement and thankfulness, “suffering can be transformed into pleasure”.⁹ Recognition provides a crucial form of “symbolic recompense” which makes the efforts and the risk of psychic destabilization worthwhile. Conversely, when recognition is lacking or is perceived as incomplete or improperly expressed, the efforts, which required a mobilization of subjective resources, can no longer be symbolized and transformed into subjectivity-enhancing opportunity. They become a mere burden to be endured by the subject, until the burden becomes too heavy and starts to undermine the psychic balance.

8. Dejours, *Conjurer la violence*, 20. Here Dejours refers specifically to a well-known study by Robert Karasek and Töres Theorell, *Healthy Work: Stress, Productivity and the Construction of the Working Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

9. Dejours, *Conjurer la violence*, 22.

Dejours distinguishes between two kinds of recognition of the subject's work. The first recognition is awarded by the broad community. This is a dimension of recognition through work well studied by sociology and social theory. It is related to the notions of achievement and performance, what German sociology of work and recognition or Axel Honneth refer to as *Leistung*. This first kind of recognition of work promotes the sense that the individual participates in society, is "socially useful".

The second form of recognition, equally if not more important to working subjects, but as yet far less studied is the recognition awarded by the peers. This form of recognition concerns the quality of the work performed. This second recognition can be more important in some cases than the other one, to the point where recognition by the peers for a work well done sometimes outweighs negative status judgements. Again the link between work as confrontation with the real and subjective economies is crucial: only those who have had to deal with the same "real" of work, that is, those who know what is actually involved in being successful in a given kind of work, can meaningfully hand out that most precious form of recognition, the one that is grounded in the real knowledge of what is involved in the task. This explains why Dejours always emphasizes the psychological importance of belonging to a work collective, of being part of a profession. Here, Dejours provides a particularly useful and rich possible explanation for the thesis famously propounded by Durkheim in his early work, in which the sociologist argued in favour of the solidarity-constituting force of "corporations", that is, groups organized around professional knowledge and interests.¹⁰

d. *Social Violence and the Rejection of the World of Work*

As said, these are all basic features of the psychodynamics of work that have been established for a while.¹¹ In the report for the violence and health commission, Dejours applies the model specifically to the issue of social violence. Some interesting social-theoretical insights arise from this.

The first link between work and violence relates to the violence that arises as a result of endemic unemployment. Even though historical comparisons are difficult, it seems difficult to deny that social violence has

10. In the famous, second preface to *The Division of Labour in Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), xxxi–lvii.

11. See in particular a thorough presentation of the model in English, Christophe Dejours, "From Psychopathology To Psychodynamics Of Work", forthcoming in *New Philosophies of Labour: Work and the Social Bond*, Nicholas Smith and Jean-Philippe Deranty (eds) (Leiden: Brill).

significantly increased in France in the last decade.¹² At regular intervals, large and medium-sized cities are shaken by violent outbursts from disenfranchised youths in the underprivileged suburbs, who target symbols of state authority but also symbols of a denied social integration (schools in particular). Similarly, there is a perceptible rise of everyday acts of uncivility and indeed of direct physical aggression. Dejours mobilizes his psychodynamic approach to offer a highly original interpretation of these worrying trends.

The deleterious impact on individuals of a denied participation in social life as a result of the scourge of unemployment is well documented in sociology and health studies. The psychodynamic approach provides an original explanation. In particular, it explains why it is mainly young male adults who fall into a cycle of violence. As we saw, the main premise of Dejours' psychodynamics in terms of its underlying theory of the subject is the idea that the foremost interest of the subject is to maintain the fragile balance that is subjective identity. When that identity is under too much stress, subjects adopt defensive stances to pre-empt the risk of mental disorganization. In other words, the fear of mental de-structuration, is, according to Dejours, one of the most fundamental affects in the human being. The main form of "defensive strategy" unveiled by psychodynamic analyses of work is one in which the group reinforces "virile" values and representations, in order to deny any room to identity-related fear. Fear is banished from the realm of possible affects by the adoption of ultra-masculine posture. In this book, Dejours imports this model into the broader field of social violence and interprets the link between social violence and unemployment in terms of a defence strategy. More particularly, he reads the violence of young populations as a form of defence against the vulnerability witnessed in the older generations, as a result of the latter's exclusion from social recognition through work.

Many adolescents and young adults whose parents have never had stable employment have organised themselves mentally and socially in a way that would enable them to endure this condition. As a result, they have created a culture without reference to the values of work or work as a mediation towards self-realisation or individual emancipa-

12. See, however, the following study from the *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions*, in which a general European trend towards an increase in violence (both exogenous and endogenous) is discussed: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/reports/TN0406TR01/TN0406TR01.pdf>. This is in line with similar European comparative studies.

tion. As they cannot reasonably hope to find the way to employment, they have formed collective defence strategies based on the rejection of work.¹³

Dejours thinks that we should speak of a “pathology of the next generation”,¹⁴ to highlight the fact that the destructuring effects of unemployment have been imported into the families through the suffering of the parents. And the defence strategies developed by the new generations target precisely the values associated with the recognitive world from which they have been excluded, that is, the values of the world of work. In particular, an education system that is based on the idealized value of culture and knowledge for their own sake and their alleged emancipatory power, but which everyone in underprivileged areas knows full well lead directly to debased work, unemployment, and exclusion from full social participation, can only appear as a lie and a provocation.

Instead of recognition through work, the young excluded populations therefore seek alternative forms of recognition: positive forms, through alternative, in particular artistic, activities (music, dance, literature for some of the most gifted); negative forms of recognition, explicitly directed against mainstream conceptions of social inclusion and involving counter-modes of employment, by joining circles based on a culture of violence and organized criminality. Dejours thus views classically the lack of employment opportunity and the exclusion from meaningful work, as the direct causes of social violence in disadvantaged areas. But instead of simply pointing to the link without explaining it, as do most sociologists, he proposes an original explanation: the absence of work is the main cause behind the rise of social violence (and not, for instance, religious, cultural or ethnic tensions, or the demise of old authority models within the family, as is widely argued in France), for the precise reasons entailed in the theory of recognition through work, because what unemployment deprives individuals of is the chance of realization through the recognition afforded by work. Populations excluded from work are deprived of a major form of recognition that is essential to individual well-being. Dejours interprets the social pathologies emerging in a society that can no longer provide meaningful work to a large part of its population as a demonstration *ex nihilo* of the centrality of work.

13. Dejours, *Conjurer la violence*, 36.

14. Dejours, *Conjurer la violence*, 54.

e. *Violence at Work*

But work and violence are not just tied to each other via the broad impact of unemployment. There is also an increase in the level of violence within workplaces. Here again the crucial causal factor is the work collective. For Dejours, the work collective matters not just because it grants a precious form of recognition (recognition by peer experts), but also because of the inherent normative logic that structures it. Dejours refers to this aspect as “deontic activity”. What he means by this is the following: the same gap that affects individual work (between the prescribed and the actual), also affects collective work, the organization of work. But in this case, it is no longer sufficient to call upon the practical intelligence of the agents involved to solve the tension between the prescriptions and the actual realization of the tasks, precisely because there are many agents involved. Individual efforts to overcome the gap between the prescribed and the actual would run into each other and create chaos. The work organization therefore always calls for a form of cooperation, in order to be actually effective. But this cooperation, which revolves at first simply around technical questions (how is the collective going to solve the problems arising from the difficulties involved in realizing the tasks), relies also heavily on normative considerations. The individual agents must show sufficient trust in each other to divulge their own tricks and secrets, which they employ to perform the tasks. They must also be able to take into consideration different needs, capacities and vulnerabilities within the collective. Individual agents must also accept being overruled by others when other arguments prevail over their own. Altogether, Dejours draws the startling, paradoxical conclusion that the best model to think of the communication that is at play within work collectives who are gathered to solve work issues, is Habermas’ normative model of communication.

For Dejours, a significant causal factor explaining the emergence of new forms of violence in workplaces, whether they are forms of violence directed against others or against oneself, is the destruction of solidarities as a result of the individualized and systematic control of the agents in the last two decades, which establishes a culture of competition and distrust amongst colleagues and instills fear in everyone. Work places have always been places where tension existed: tensions between colleagues, with hierarchy, with the clients, and so on. Indeed, many traditional workplaces and professions hosted cultures of violence, in particularly dangerous professions whose members could only conjure the fear of injury and death by creating ultra-virile defence strategies, to defy danger and death, the better to master them. What is new in the contemporary forms of violence witnessed in today’s work places, according to Dejours, is that they touch professions that so far had been less affected, or not at all affected by the phenomenon. General social

tension outside of work can explain the emergence of violence within workplaces for workers dealing with populations suffering from comparatively higher levels of poverty and unemployment. But even in other areas and in other professions, some forms of violence are witnessed that were unknown or not known to that extent before. In these cases, Dejours argues, it is the demise of work solidarity that explains the new phenomenon. Whereas in previous times injustice and inequity were bearable thanks to the support from work colleagues within the collective, in all recent documented cases of violence, “it is when the collective shows indifference that the reaction to injustice can degenerate into violence”.¹⁵ Dejours continues:

violence, as a consequence of the dys-functioning in the organisation of work, appears only when on top of injustice and inequity, the social sphere of work is so damaged that the tolerance to injustice ends up in resignation, or even indifference, to other individuals’ unhappiness, to which it seems nothing can be opposed ... Violence at work can always be analysed after it has arisen, as a symptom of the de-structuring of collective life, which in some cases might have occurred a long time before.¹⁶

Once again, such negative social phenomena provide confirmation of the normative power of work, in this case of work collectives, for individual mental health.

2. Work and Suicide

a. *Recent Suicides at the Workplace in France*

As said in the introduction, the world of work in France has recently been shaken by a series of suicides, which occurred directly in workplaces (something unheard of not long ago, at least for the type of companies involved) or were directly linked to work stress. As a response to these dramatic events that have shaken public life in France, last year Dejours published a book written with Florence Bègue, a psychologist of work. The book, entitled *Suicide et travail: que faire?*¹⁷ (“Suicide and Work: What Can be Done?”) is addressed first to health professionals active in the area of work. It provides them with a list of theoretical and practical tools to organize interventions in

15. Dejours, *Conjurer la violence*, 56.

16. Dejours, *Conjurer la violence*, 57.

17. Christophe Dejours and Florence Bègue, *Suicide et travail: que faire?* (Paris: PUF, 2009).

real workplaces. But the book is also Dejours' answer to the general public's questions that have been raised by these tragedies. In the first part of the book, Dejours sets up a basic theoretical framework, drawing on his psychodynamic model, to introduce Florence Bègue's account of her intervention in a real workplace, described in the second part. In the third part, Dejours draws methodological implications from Florence Bègue's account, which is mainly addressed to health professionals.

What are the broad theoretical lessons that can be learnt from this book of psychopathology, targeting a burning current issue? The first significant lesson that can be drawn stems from the middle part where Florence Bègue recounts her 18 month stint at the Mermot plants, a company specializing in aeronautic maintenance. There have been numerous books recently giving firsthand accounts of the increased psychological pressure under which contemporary workers are placed as a result of general economic constraints and the more specific constraints stemming from contemporary management and HR methods.¹⁸ Florence Bègue's account takes place within the literature testifying to the state of work experience in the developed world today.¹⁹ She describes how quickly a work organization can become dysfunctional, creating deleterious interpersonal relations that can lead to extreme forms of violence against others and against oneself.

One might object that this is only one example amongst others of the nasty side of human nature and of human institutions more specifically: any human institution, not just workplaces, can create conditions in which individuals are led to condone or perform violence against others, leading the most vulnerable to extreme gestures. To refer to a classical text, that is a key reference for Dejours, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*,²⁰ Freud famously analysed unorganized and organized groups and the fate of individual consciousness and libidinal resources in them. Freud described the deactivation of moral sense and of higher cognitive functions as a result of the inclusion in a group. But he didn't single out workplaces over other institutions (the Church, the army, and so on). Dejours' claim

18. Notably a number of excellent accounts by American journalists, see Jill Andresky Fraser, *White Collar Sweatshop: the Deterioration of Work and its Reward in Corporate America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002); Louis Uchitelle, *Disposable Americans: Layoffs and their Consequences* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Steven Greenhouse, *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker* (New York: Anchor, 2009).

19. Another recent example, from an institutional European source, which documents the increase in work-related stress (p. 36): <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/reports/EU0502AR01/EU0502AR01.pdf>

20. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, J. Strachey (trans.) (London: Hogarth Press, 1949 [1922])

is that work plays a prominent role in the formation and de-formation of individual moral and cognitive capacities. We will see in the next sections how he justifies this claim metapsychologically. Here we can already note that from his perspective, prior to any claim about the structural centrality of work in the formation of individual moral and intellectual abilities, the documented violence happening in contemporary workplaces is in itself a strong empirical indicator, in the negative once again, of the importance of work for individual capacities. Whatever explanation one might favour, it is simply the case that contemporary work forces many people to do things to others to which they ought to object morally and indeed that they reject in their life outside of work.

The difficulty of “lifting the lid” on workplace violence is not just an empirical issue, but one that has a structural dimension as well. On the whole the world of work has always been and remains a “hidden abode”, to paraphrase a famous passage in *Capital I*.²¹ The world of work remains a largely invisible place, secluded from public scrutiny, until the seriousness of what goes on in it lifts the veil, either because the courts become involved, or because the gestures performed by the workers are simply too spectacular to remain unseen. This structural feature of workplaces was already highlighted by Everett Hughes in his ground-breaking sociological work. He had drawn attention to the significant role of boundary-setting, of insider-outsider logic, in the interrelations between professions (amongst other institutions) within social life.²² Invisibility according to Hughes’ work is due not just to the lack of interest of the general public. It is also secreted by the professions and workplaces themselves, who hide their own inner functioning in the general social competition amongst working groups. However, there are also other factors, beyond the general social logic highlighted by Hughes, that explain the current invisibility of work.²³ The lack of interest of the general public and the general media in what goes on in workplaces is a real, empirical phenomenon, due in no small part to the defensive stance in which union organizations have been forced. But it is also reflected in theory, notably in social and political philosophy, which, following the paradigmatic critique of Arendt, has, from the early 1980s onwards, taken work for granted and given up using it as a central issue around which other political questions were organized. The demise of Marxism and of Marx-inspired politics most likely brought those two movements together.

21. Karl Marx, *Capital I*, B. Fowkes (trans.) (London: Penguin, 1990), 279.

22. Everett Hughes, “Good People and Dirty Work”, *Social Problems* 10(1) (1962): 3–11.

23. See Emmanuel Renault, “The Political Invisibility of Work and its Philosophical Echoes”, in Smith and Deranty (eds), *New Philosophies of Labour*.

In the brief theoretical frame he sets up for the book, Dejours analyses the reasons explaining the increase of suicides directly related to work, as a new phenomenon, one not witnessed in previous times, at least not to this extent or in these professions, by health professionals specializing in workplace relations. Of course, workplaces have always been stressful places, in particular places where bullying and harassment occurred. According to Dejours, the two main reasons explaining why the link between suicide and work has not previously appeared are the following. First, the hardest professions in which the temptation for suicide did arise were also professions with rigid collective defence strategies in which the open admission of individual failure was simply impossible. People then tended to take their lives, if they were pushed to this extremity, outside of the workplace. The link to work was difficult to establish. Second, there also existed strong forms of solidarity, which often led to an implicit acknowledgement by the working teams of an individual's vulnerability, and the corresponding adaptation of the work organization and working processes to accommodate the individual's specific weakness. Indeed, in her account of the Mermot plant, Florence Bègue describes one unit that remained sane in the overall mayhem that the company had become. This unit managed to stay out of the chaos because it was isolated from the rest, spatially (it was referred to as "Siberia" by the other units), but most importantly organizationally, as it had not been affected by the introduction of new management methods.²⁴ In this unit, by contrast with the rest of the plant, injured or vulnerable individuals were shielded by the group, they were offered positions that took their difficulties into consideration (physical, psychological), and so on.

Why then do we suddenly see the appearance of suicides in the workplaces themselves, or of self-harm and suicidal gestures explicitly linked to working conditions – an extraordinary development compared with previous decades? For Dejours, again, this is the result of the "destruction of collective life at work"²⁵ as a result of the profound transformation of work organizations and the introduction of new management techniques, notably the individual evaluation of performance and the motto of "total quality", but also of other strategies aimed at overwhelming the organized force of unionized workers and work collectives more generally. For Dejours, the last two decades have seen a great battle take place, between, on the one hand,

24. The reason for this is interesting in itself: this particular unit's function is to recycle materials from other units. This is another recurring trait of work organizations: the closer they are to matter, the more they tend to be put at arm's length, even in an organization of production that is supposed to be purely driven by instrumental, technical considerations.

25. Dejours, *Suicide et travail, que faire?*, 32.

“the Trojan horse”²⁶ of modern management, and on the other, the values inherent in the world of work. At the heart of this battle lies a fundamental opposition between two views of the working activity and the working agent. On the one hand, an objectivistic, quantitative, scientific approach, which views the working activity merely from the angle of productivity and the worker as a cost. Against this stands a view of work as lived activity, and of the worker as a social and intelligent being who has an interest in his work and in participation in the working group. This view of work emphasizes the importance of the quality of work for the psychic balance of individuals, and of organizations that make effective work possible, both for simple productive reasons (because of the gap between the prescribed and the actual), and in normative terms (what the collective needs to offer for cooperation to be possible). From cooperation, a specific culture of work emerges in each working group, within the broader framework of the profession’s particular ethos. This culture is a mixture of: on the one hand technical rules, which however also lead to aesthetic rules defining the “job well done” and indeed the criteria to be recognized as a true expert; and on the other hand social and indeed normative rules, defining modes of interaction. The French word *métier* captures something of this culture that is indissolubly technical, social and moral. As we saw previously, for Dejours the work collectives play a crucial role in enabling individual workers to transform the challenges they face in their work, from a potentially destabilizing factor, to one that can be discussed and worked upon in common, from a potential cause of suffering to a potential resource for a strengthening of psychic life. Here, in the case of violence against oneself, as in the case of violence against others previously, it is primordially the destruction of networks of solidarity in the workplace, the utter individualization of performance and the denial of recognition in the specific sense it has in relation to the working activity, that are the prime causes for the great increase of stress in modern workplaces.

b. *Other Elements to Consider*

Other elements of Dejours’ and Bègue’s book are theoretically significant and worth discussing briefly. First, Dejours’ summary account of the “battle of work” of the last decades indicates that the expression should not be taken as a mere metaphor. In some sectors, the confrontation between old cultures of work and new management methods has been intense. To counter the resistance to the introduction of new modes of organization, a number of strategies have been implemented aimed explicitly at isolating and pushing

26. Dejours, *Suicide et travail, que faire?*, 35.

aside the most experienced workers who could offer the strongest resistance. A particularly problematic development, from the point of view of working cultures, has been the great depreciation of knowledge and expertise gained from work experience, in favour of managerial skills. This struggle between old work culture and new management has often been a generational struggle, between older workers and new graduates with no sense of the cultural values they were uprooting. This has amounted to a massive denial of recognition, of that recognition precisely that is linked to the “doing” of the workers, and which included them in the specific community of a profession.²⁷ For workers committed to their craft, this has given the pathetic spectacle of a deliberate, organized disdain for the reality of the work, of a sustained attack on quality, in favour of purely utilitarian, external considerations.

A strong objection to this kind of criticism is that the new methods of management are economically efficient, and therefore, in a context of harsh economic competition, necessary. Dejours does not deny that the new modes of organization have in many cases allowed an increase in productivity. His criticism targets two aspects of the new managerial culture. The first is that the harm done to individuals by the new forms of organization can be so great that economic efficiency can no longer justify them. Some “compromise” has to be made between the economic imperative and the human factor.

Second, Dejours in fact questions the reality and durability of the economic efficiency gained by the new work organizations. Here, the original points he raises stem directly from his unique approach to work. The doubt that a Dejourian approach raises about economic efficacy is linked to his emphasis on cooperation not only as a mode of socialization for the working agents, but also and primordially, as a core element in the actual implementation of productive rules towards effective production. What happens when cooperation (in the precise sense of a communicative discussion about the prescribed organization in order to make it actually work) becomes difficult or impossible, as the work organization organizes competition and distrust amongst individuals, and undermines and depreciates older working cultures? How does production still occur? Management through fear and threat can mobilize subjective forces for a while. It can also exploit the expertise and practical knowledge gathered under previous regimes. But it cannot muster the same resources as true cooperation. One might claim then following Dejours, that, beyond the compromise between productivity and

27. Note how high status professions have managed to retain strong links to their historical professional cultures. Surely this has something to do with their comparative social and political power. This demonstrates the descriptive and normative currency of the idea of working cultures, of crafts and *métiers*. Recall that Durkheim’s argument in favour of corporations had an explicit anticipatory dimension.

health that would be normatively justified, it would also be possible to advocate a different organization of work that would actually not compromise on efficacy and productivity, by making use of the collective intelligence that open and communicative workplaces afford. This, one might remark, was quite precisely the ideal driving the reform of work organizations in the Toyota model, often cited as one of the main examples driving transformations of work organizations after the collapse of the Fordist model. Critics of that model in Europe tend to emphasize the aspects of the model that were not imported, especially those relating to the autonomy and participation of the workers in the design of work processes.

One could also claim, following Dejours, that under some aspects, the economic efficacy of new working methods is actually illusory. Dejours makes this claim in *Suicide and Work*,²⁸ but also in previous books, in relation to the methods of individual evaluation of performance, and the aims of “total quality” and adherence to ISO norms.²⁹

In relation to the evaluation of performance, Dejours argues that an objective, quantified evaluation of individual performance is structurally impossible because real work lies in the subjective act that is required of the worker to overcome the gap between the prescription and its actual implementation. As soon as the context of the working activity is minimally diverse, which is the case for almost all work, including work which from the outside seems mechanistic, and as soon as contingencies arise between the planned organization and the actual reality of the working task, it becomes highly artificial and indeed unjust for the workers, to attempt to put numerical figures on their work. In a previous book dedicated wholly to the question of evaluation, Dejours cites the example of policemen who are under pressure to achieve a certain benchmarked number of police operations in one month. If they spend one whole night trying to catch a drug dealer but for some reason the dealer escapes, that is one lost opportunity to score. The likelihood then is that the police officers will spend the next day verbalizing motorists for minor offences, so that the figures look okay. The same example can be repeated in any sector. In other words, the evaluation of individual performance, beside the injustice that it can represent (since real work might not be seen or put in a figure), or the instrument of pressure it can give management if used in bad faith, can even become counter-productive. It can easily have side effects that actually counteract the sought after economic efficacy. Dejours is not against evaluation *per se*,

28. Dejours and Bègue, *Suicide et travail*, 47-51.

29. See, in particular, Christophe Dejours, *L'évaluation du travail à l'épreuve du réel. Critique des fondements de l'évaluation* (Paris: INRA Editions, 2003).

but the evaluation methods he favours are those that remain in touch with the reality of work. And there is no other way to know about it but to ask those who confront it directly. Good, efficient evaluation must be conducted in cooperation with all involved.

In relation to quality, again the ideal behind its introduction is belied by the reality. Since the respect of ISO norms or other quality norms, is essential for the market acceptance of a product or service, but since the disorganization of work collectives prevents the work organization from seriously taking into account the “real” of work, the result is on the one hand a huge increase of workload due to the bureaucratic overload demanded by traceability and ISO-compatibility or other form of benchmarking; and on the other hand, a huge temptation to commit fraud and lie about quality. Informed by his patients about what really goes on in many sectors of activity, Dejours can conclude:

the inconsiderate manipulation of quality norms in the real world of work, and its entanglement with fraudulent practices to satisfy ‘iso norms’, ends up discrediting the very idea of quality, to the point where in many sectors of economic activity, the value of quality itself becomes ambiguous.³⁰

For Dejours, this is an important factor in explaining the increase in stress levels in many workplaces today. For him, workers have an intrinsic interest in doing good work, and conversely it impacts on their sense of self to be forced to work badly. Beside the question of the mental health impact of enforced bad practices, it is clear that it is economically inefficient to have a system in which quality is intrinsically compromised. The recent cases of recalls in the automobile industry (ironically by Toyota, the paradigmatic post-Fordist business), and of dodgy practices in other industries (insulation scandal in Australia), and of their exorbitant costs for the companies and governments involved, testify to this simple economic fact.

3. Travail vivant (1): Sexuality and Work

Dejours’ detailed and precise accounts of contemporary work practices and his substantive diagnoses of work-related pathologies, of which the *Suicide and Work* and *Conjuring Violence* books are the two most recent examples, are based on a sophisticated meta-theoretical foundation, articulated mainly

30. Dejours, *Suicide et travail*, 50.

around a “psychoanalytical anthropology”, which establishes in “metapsychological” and philosophical terms the multivalent centrality of work. In *Travail vivant*, also published last year, Dejours has given the first systematic presentation of the multi-layered foundation underpinning his “psychodynamics of work”.

The first volume of the book, on “Sexuality and Work”, outlines the key features of a theory of subjectivity in which work is shown to be central not just as an activity providing external challenges and opportunities, but also as a structuring mechanism within the psychic economy itself. The second volume, on “Work and Emancipation”, draws substantial social, political and cultural implications from the thesis of the psychological centrality of work. In this section, we focus on Dejours’ theory of subjectivity, emphasizing the most significant theoretical innovations. We look at the social and political implications in the last section.

a. *The Problem of “double centrality”*

The basis of Dejours’ philosophical edifice is a view of the subject as constituted through a double centrality: the centrality of sexuality and the centrality of work.

The centrality of the sexual relates to what is for Dejours an obvious fact, one however overlooked by most theorists. The correct idea that subjective identity is the product of intersubjective relations, should not make us overlook the fact that the subject is first and foremost a body, that is, a bundle of biological, in particular sexual, drives. As we shall see in a moment, Dejours does not interpret the sexual element in a deterministic or evolutionistic sense, but rather as a structuration throughout the subject’s psychic history of biologically given impulsive forces via constitutive interactions with significant others. We will also see later why it is crucial to maintain the sexual element in normative discussions. The centrality of work is for Dejours another most obvious fact, one documented everyday by the ordinary “*clinique*” of work, which as a health practitioner he has observed for the last three decades: that is, the central role played by work in the lives of everyday people, for the worst (psychopathological phenomena directly linked to work), or the best (individuals clearly fulfilling themselves through their work); work as a factual, central factor in people’s lives.

The most important question to solve for Dejours is: how can these two “centralities” be reconciled? Put this way, the metaphor of centrality suggests a rather straightforward answer. There can only be one centre to a circle, and so somehow work has to be shown to be central to the subject in terms of his/her constitution, at the level of psychic development. Since for Dejours

Freud's key conceptual vocabulary remains the most appropriate one to discuss these questions (psychoanalytical anthropology is the philosophical equivalent to "metapsychology"), work must be shown to be involved in the logic of the drives themselves. This, in a nutshell is the fundamental claim put forward by Dejours: underneath all the other ways in which work can be said to be "central", work is central for the subject in a deep-psychological sense, as a key constitutive factor, as an element constitutively involved in the destiny of an individual's *Trieb*-life.

The problem with this claim is that it seems to run counter to the letter of many of Freud's texts, for whom work appears only as one of the social factors of repression and is certainly not taken in a positive sense, as a positive development factor.³¹ In order to argue for the psychological centrality of work, Dejours is thus forced to propose a corrected version of Freud's theory of drives. This correction of Freud's classical drive-theory amounts to a fascinating theory of the subject which reverberates far beyond the scope of psychoanalytical debates.

b. *New Theory of Drives*

Dejours' bold claim to marry the centrality of work and the centrality of sexuality, is that the proper way to understand the influence of the drives upon the subjective apparatus is as a kind of work, a form of "psychic work". Dejours proposes to call this kind of psychic work, *Arbeit*, in reference to the prevalence of the term in many of Freud's metapsychological concepts (*Traumarbeit*, *Trauerarbeit*, *Durcharbeitung*, *Verarbeitung*, and so on), even though Freud nowhere pays attention to the positive, qualitative effects of work. Dejours finds in Freud's presentation of the drive concept in his first topos the famous following definition: "the drive (is) a measure of the demand for work (*Arbeit*) imposed upon the soul as a result of its interlocking with the corporeal".³² Dejours argues that this passage must be read literally and that Freud did not use the concept of *Arbeit* randomly (instead of a more generic concept, like action). Accordingly,

in the relationship between body and soul, the drive acts firstly as a source of excitement, whose increase, because of its inherent power to undo the structures (*liaisons*) of subjective identity, or indeed to desta-

31. See, for instance, Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, J. Strachey (trans.) (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989 [1927]).

32. German edition: "Triebe und Triebchicksale", *Gesammelte Werke* 10: 210–32. English translation: "Instincts and their Vicissitudes", *Standard Edition* 14: 117–40 (translation altered).

bilise them, requests in return a kind of work, performed by the ego under the pressure of this push that does not cease to act. The psychic work consists in a reassembling of the structures that had been established so far between mnemonic traces. This work of reassembling of the self follows upon the latter's destabilisation under the effect of the drive-impulse.³³

Against a theory of the drive which puts in a separate soul-power the capacity to tame and redirect the psychic energy stemming from the drives, Dejours inverts the relationship: the "soul", the psychic apparatus, is in a sense the "product" of the drives, inasmuch as the latter force the nascent ego to work upon itself in order to accommodate them in an acceptable psychic balance. Of course, the ego can fail to heed these requests and opt to be overwhelmed by the temptation of the pleasure promised by a partial object. But in such a case, the ego's architecture is destabilized, pathology is on the verge of setting in. By contrast, the constitution of psychic identity results from the process whereby the internal stimuli (stemming not just from sexual drives but also, more primitively, from basic biological needs and attachment needs) have "pushed" the self to reassemble its internal representations in a new economy, after an initial period of destabilization. The drives therefore should be thought of as a form of "conatus", whose product is the self itself.

Dejours' conception is at its boldest (and there, it will most likely be too bold for many) when he suggests that even though they are separate, socially defined work (*poiesis*) and psychic work (*Arbeit*) are in fact formally comparable. This in fact, is what helps solve the problem of "double centrality". Dejours thinks of psychic work along the very same lines as work defined by ergonomics, that is, as the subjective overcoming of the obstacles leading to the realization of a task. The task in this case is inherent in subjective life: the subject has an intrinsic interest in maintaining, or in re-establishing, a relatively stable identity. The internal stimuli stemming from the drives (both endogenous stimuli and stimuli resulting from the translation within of interactions with the external world, especially the intersubjective one) challenge the extant subjective economy and force a reassembling of the entire metapsychological construct. Psychic work designates what we could term (not Dejours' term) the self-creativity and psychic "intelligence" the subject has to mobilize in order to overcome the destabilization provoked by the drives. In other words, the subject for Dejours is a product of what we might term "*self-poiesis*".

33. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 1, 59.

The implications of this revised conception of the drives are striking. The model means that Dejours provides a robust way of thinking the unity of body and mind. Notwithstanding many programmatic declarations in the last decades, much social scientific and the vast majority of philosophical discourse continues to operate on an implicit dualism of body and mind, passive and active, intellectual/perceptual. On Dejours' model by contrast, the psychic apparatus is a direct continuation and, we might say, production, of the body, inasmuch as the latter forces the subjective economy to constantly rearrange itself into acceptable psychic positions. Most importantly, this includes the higher moral and cognitive functions. This is perhaps the most astonishing claim in this first volume of *Travail vivant*. In his earlier work, Dejours had already argued that real work always involves a form of practical intelligence, which mobilizes not just logical or technical capacities, but also the affective, sensitive resources of the body. A good operator is someone who knows the machine in an anthropomorphic way, has a sensitive empathy with it which enables him to anticipate, to feel in advance, looming mechanical problems, in the smallest changes in noise, smell, speed, the mechanical problems. A good driver is someone who has internalized the space of the vehicle into a sort of second skin, and so on. A key reference in these earlier analyses was the Merleau-Ponty inspired phenomenology of work processes conducted at the Munich *Institute for Social Research* by Fritz Böhle and Brigit Milkau.³⁴ These examples of embodied intelligence played a decisive role in Dejours' attempt to revise Freud's metapsychology. They have acted as paradigmatic examples, demonstrating the necessity to establish the link from the corporeal to the cognitive. Here, in *Travail vivant*, Dejours wants to provide a full metapsychological and philosophical account to justify the claim in its most general form: to think is to think through one's body, and indeed, to think is to think one's body.

c. *Body and Thought*

This claim that to think (in both moral and cognitive judgements) is to think with one's body, and indeed, to think one's body, will sound scandalous only to someone who continues to maintain a sharp ontological divide between body and mind. To sustain his claim, Dejours appeals to two separate theoretical traditions, and shows how they combine their strengths to ground intelligence in the body.

34. Fritz Böhle and Brigit Milkau, *Vom Handrad zum Bildschirm. Eine Untersuchung zur sinnlichen Erfahrung im Arbeitsprozeß* (Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 1988).

The first tradition is the neo-Freudian theory developed by Jean Laplanche. There is not sufficient space here to show how much Dejours borrows from Laplanche's relatively well-known "seduction theory". The most important element for us to note is the claim that the creation of the psychological functions, including the subconscious, is the product of the child's active thinking. In this model, the different functions of the psyche arise as the child attempts to interpret, or "translate", the effects on his/her body resulting from his/her interactions with the significant others. The subconscious designates that remainder of unexplainable attitudes, gestures and implicit messages addressed by the adult, which remain a mystery for the child (notably because his/her own genital functions have not yet developed), despite his/her best effort at understanding them. The position of a subconscious is crucial in Dejours' arguments in moral and political philosophy, as we shall see in the next section. But for now, we need only note how Laplanche's seduction theory provides a model to link intimately, in one continuous movement, bodily affects and thought. Gradually, as the child continuously interprets his/her affective life, a "second body" arises, on top of the biological, innate one. That second body is the body appropriated by the growing subject, not just by learning to control the biological functions and through the progressive mastery of movements and the body schema, but also, and intimately linked to these latter processes, through the gradual eroticization of the biological (via the constitution of the subconscious). This long and arduous process yields the adult subject, an indistinguishable unity of body and mind, a body-mind, or mind-body, whose intelligent capacities are rooted in and fed by, a unique and complex affective structure.

The other tradition Dejours appeals to in order to substantiate his fundamental claim of the bodily nature of intelligence is philosophical. His main reference here is a philosopher little known outside of France, Maine de Biran (1766-1824). De Biran's analyses are classical inquiries into the primordial "facts" of consciousness, following on from the British empiricists and paralleling what the German idealists were investigating at the same time. His key argument is that the most basic form of self-consciousness arises in effort, in willed action. However, self-familiarity is not simply given, or to be thought as *a priori* transcendently primordial fact. The resistance to the act is a key, necessary feature of self-consciousness: "the primitive fact designates the evident and necessary relation between a motor effort stemming from the self and a form of resistance that is either organic or external".³⁵ The reason why Dejours dwells on the old philosopher's argument, is that it provides a clear formal scheme explaining how the development of a "sense of self" via the

35. Cited by Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol.1, 66.

encounter with objective resistance, is also at the root of thinking capacities. De Biran's basic explanation is the following: the subject replicates in active fashion, through willed, increasingly directed and refined efforts, the movements first caused by innate mechanisms, which trigger the resistance from internal and external obstacles, out of which the grasp of the self by itself is made possible and increased. These sought encounters with resisting reality enable a parallel increase in mastery (both cognitive and practical) of the internal and external worlds. For instance, noises initially proffered without control are continuously repeated by the infant, in increasingly willed and directed fashion, until they become intelligence-forming words.

This relatively obscure philosophical reference is fascinating because it points to a rich tradition of philosophical theories of the subject that have argued along similar lines, emphasizing the organic roots of intellectual development and the role of objectual resistance to human effort in the constitution of self-consciousness and intellectual capacities.³⁶ For the emphasis on the resistance of the real as a transcendental condition of self-consciousness, we think of Fichte's notion of *Anstoss*.³⁷ For more recent theories emphasizing both the organic and the real, often by reference to a holistic concept of experience and concurrent rejection of subjectivistic models, we think of Mead's theory of perception,³⁸ of Dewey's germane logic of inquiry,³⁹ of the existential philosophers' arguments about what might be called the "reverberating" role of the objective in the constitution of self-consciousness, of the predominant role of the object in Adorno's epistemology.⁴⁰ Beyond all the differences in the detail, one core intuition operates throughout: self-consciousness arises through experiences of encounter with an opposing reality, experiences that are primordially corporeal, and which play a determining part in the process of intelligent development, in the strictest sense of "intelligence".

36. I have attempted to retrieve this tradition in my critical reading of Honneth's intersubjectivistic social theory, in *Beyond Communication. A Critical Study of Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2009).

37. See Johann G. Fichte, *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge* (1794/95), in Peter Heath and John Lachs (trans. and ed.), *The Science of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

38. George H. Mead, *Philosophy of the Act* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1938).

39. John Dewey, *The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Hold and Co., 1938).

40. "Without any relation to an empirical consciousness, to the living I, there would be no transcendental, purely mental consciousness. Mediation of the object means that it must not be statically, dogmatically hypostatized but can be known only as it entwines with subjectivity; mediation of the subject means that without the moment of objectivity it would be literally nil", (See, Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, E. B. Ashton [trans.] [London: Seabury Press, 1973], 185–86).

In this tradition of thought, Dejours is the theorist who has put the strongest emphasis on work as the preeminent form of experience in which such constitutive encounters take place, which repeat for the adult subject the constitutive, learning experiences made as a child. The only reference Dejours' concept of work might compare to in this respect is Marx. Dejours' insistence on the bodily aspect of intelligence, and as a consequence on the subjectivity-forming power of work, can aptly be read as a metapsychological explication of Marx's concept of "living labour".⁴¹ As we will see in the next section, the ultimate philosophical foundation of Dejours' theory of subjectivity, work and action, is a phenomenological concept of life (subjective life as organically rooted, affective and productive self-awareness). In this particular respect, it can be read as a significant explication of the basic concept of "life-process" in the *German Ideology*, which plays a similar role in Marx's philosophy of work, as "absolute life" in Dejours.⁴²

Beyond scholarly interests, it is important to locate Dejours' arguments in the philosophical tradition, and more particularly the tradition of Marxist philosophy, because this helps to see the substantial implications of his neo-Freudian approach to work for practical discussions. A serious challenge to Dejours' claims about the centrality of work in social and political theory comes from the authors who have argued about the "end of work". Amongst these authors are sociologists and social theorists who have exerted a great influence in concrete policy discussions seeking to offer progressive models of social-economic development beyond mainstream neoliberal and orthodox socialist alternatives (Claus Offe, Jürgen Habermas, Alain

41. For a reminder, see the following passage, from one of the "Appendices" to *Capital*: "the distinction between objectified and living labour manifests itself in the actual process of labour. The means of production, cotton, spindles, etc., are products, use-values, which embody definite, useful, concrete acts of labour (...) The *work of spinning*, on the other hand, although a mode of labour included in the means of production, is nevertheless a distinctive, specific mode of labour, and as *living labour* it is in the process of realising itself, it continuously gives birth to its products and thus stands in contrast to labour which has already acquired objective form in the shape of products peculiar to it. From this vantage-point, too, we see the antagonism between capital in an established form on the one hand and the *living labour as the immediate life task of the worker on the other*", see Marx, *Capital I*, 993.

42. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 42. A passage like the following one, read literally, applies quite well to Dejours' own thinking: "in direct contrast to (...) philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven (...) setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process". As the previous quote made clear, in *Capital*, the notion of living labour maintains an implicit reference to this naturalistic background. In another passage, Marx defines living labour as "the expenditure of the (individual's) life's energy", see Marx, *Capital I*, 982.

Touraine in particular).⁴³ At the heart of these proposals, however, stands a philosophical questioning of the constitutive importance of productive work for subjects. The “end of work” literature is premised on a rejection of what is assumed to be an old productivist prejudice underlying work-centred politics, namely anthropological or deep-psychological arguments about the formative importance of work for individuals and/or the species. The two bodies of thought in which these three dimensions (subject theory, critique of productivist work and emancipatory politics) were articulated most brilliantly were the writings of André Gorz and Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse’s marriage of Freud and Marx in particular, expressed a hugely influential critique of the reification at the heart of modern work, which seemed, even for later thinkers disagreeing with him on all other aspects, to seal the divorce between progressive politics and the old work paradigm. We should view Dejours’ theoretical proposal, his attempt to link a new reading of Freud’s metapsychology to general questions of social and political theory, against this rich counter-tradition of neo- or post-Marxist progressive politics, in order to gain the full measure of the significance of his latest books.

d. *The Real of Sexual Difference and the Real of Work*

Dejours’ insistence on the centrality of work at all levels (in subjective formation, in social relations and in politics) already provides a useful general perspective: “gender relations cannot be separated from work relations, and work relations are always at the same time gender relations”.⁴⁴ Work is a central locus and indeed a key stake in the social domination constituted around sexual difference. The organization of work is an expression, but also an instrument, and indeed a stake, in the constitution and exercise of male domination in general. We can briefly unpack these three separate yet connected dimensions. First, domination at work (what tasks are reserved for women; the level of symbolic and material reward they receive for their work; and so on) is the direct product of general male hegemony in society. Second, the division of labour, the social interpretation of activities, the sexualization of professions, help entrench general male domination. And finally, as a result of this reciprocal relation, the struggle between the sexes over social status takes work as one of its key stakes and objects of contestation.

43. A very useful synthesis of their arguments and their significance in contemporary policy debates on work can be found in Shaun Wilson, *The Struggle over Work. The “End of Work” and Employment Options in Post-industrial Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 13-34 and 36-59.

44. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 1, 143.

Dejours, however, goes further than these general claims, and attempts to give a metapsychological account of the broad sociological fact according to which work is a substantial factor (an expression, instrument and stake) in gender domination. For him, a crucial element is the different reaction, on average, of female children to sexual difference, compared with male children. Dejours explicitly rejects Freud's outdated and infamous remarks on the topic. Instead, he seeks to interpret what seems to be a different kind of reaction amongst children to the fact of sexual difference, through his Laplanchian model of psychic development as interpretation and translation of puzzling experiences. Accordingly, "the fact is that little boys tend to evacuate the question through denial, whereas little girls tend to recognise and symbolise it".⁴⁵ In other words, the formation of the male gender, according to Dejours, tends to be organized around a denial of "the real of sexual difference". By contrast, the female gender is organized around greater acceptance and thus greater attempts at making sense of, the key fact of sexual difference. This different psychic attitude towards one of the most arresting of primitive puzzlements then structures gender difference in adult life as the life of the subject consistently mobilizes affective components where the relation with the other sex is involved.

In a move typical of his mode of argumentation (and which undeniably will be appear problematic to many),⁴⁶ Dejours links this primitive denial of the real of sexual difference to the denial of suffering at work, as it is witnessed in particular in collective defence strategies, which develop ultra-virile cultures to avert the risk of destabilization caused by work vulnerability. According to him, these two organizing features of psychic economies structurally reinforce each other. Vulnerability at work demands a denial of the real of work, at least of those parts of the real of work (possibility of alienation, injury, death) that risk threatening psychic balance. At home, a vulnerability of a different kind arises, the affective vulnerability involved in the intimate relation. But in order to be effective, a psychic structure cannot be switched on and off. It needs to be maintained even outside of work in order to continue to be effective. Consequently, Dejours concludes, the ultra-virile position at work leads to a denial of affective dependence at home. However, this phenomenon would not be so powerful if individu-

45. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 1, 153. On this point he refers to Eleanor Gavenson and Herman Roiphe's *Infantile Origins of Sexual Identity* (New York: International Universities Press, 1981).

46. Even though it is classical in several strands of social theory, notably in the Frankfurt School style of critical theory, from Adorno and Horkheimer's continuous focus on childhood as key explanatory and critical element, to Honneth's systematic recourse to arguments drawn from genetic psychology and psychoanalysis.

als of the male gender were not always already in a position to deny the reality of affective attachment, as a result of their primitive denial of sexual difference.

By contrast, Pascale Molinier's research, which substantially guides Dejours' argument here, unveils the different kinds of defence strategies developed by feminized professions (in particular nurses), compared with masculinized professions.⁴⁷ In opposition with their "male" counterparts, Molinier shows how "female" defence strategies at work revolve around the tragic/ironic acceptance of the real in all of its destabilizing aspects. Similarly, in the intimate sphere the "female" position tends to be an acceptance of affective interdependence, rather than its denial.

For Dejours, it is this contrast between two possible psychic positions in the face of vulnerability, and the unity of the psyche from work to home, that explain gender domination to a substantial extent, as much as general social and cultural factors. In the struggle between the partners arising from the double vulnerability of work and affective dependence, the one partner who accepts the reality of vulnerability is in a weaker position because she knows that it is pointless to deny the real. The only alternative then is to break up (but by definition we are in a situation of strong affective interdependence), or to cede to the irrational demands of the other. The priority generally given to male interests in the family (both in terms of the division of labour at home and in the balance between work and home) thus results paradoxically from the psychic superiority of women in their recognition of the reality of vulnerability: "it is because women are more realistic than men that they lose the battle of domination".⁴⁸ Dejours and Molinier see the confirmation of their analysis in the fact that tasks of care work that involve dealing with the vulnerability of other human beings (physical and psychic distress, from simple everyday care of family members, to illness and death), are generally performed by women. This is not simply a result of general social and cultural domination, or due to some mythical female characteristics. Rather, they argue that this is the result of a more open stance, in the female gender, towards the risks of destabilization of one's own identity, in the confrontation with the weaknesses of an other.

Let us see now how we can close the circle between work-*Arbeit* and work-*poiesis*. This will enable us to recapitulate the general movement of

47. Pascale Molinier, *L'énigme de la femme active. Egoïsme, sexe et compassion* (Paris: Payot, 2006); *Les enjeux psychiques du travail* (Paris: Payot, 2006); "Care as Work: Interdependent Vulnerabilities and Discreet Knowledge", in Smith and Deranty (eds), *New Philosophies of Labour*.

48. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 1, 155.

this first book, and move to its social and political implications. We discovered earlier Dejours' bold claim that psychic work must in fact be thought of as a kind of work not dissimilar in its structure to productive work. Psychic work requires creativity, sensitivity, intelligence, in order to surmount the challenges to the subjective economy. Psychic work, then, is a form of work in the precise, "ergonomic" sense of the term. But the relationship between the two core concepts also goes the other way: all work of *poiesis* (socially organized work) requires a subjective investment, is a challenge to subjective economies, and thus forces subjects to undergo a form of *Arbeit*-work. Good jobs, meaningful work are types of jobs and work that have sufficient variation, autonomy and recognitive rewards attached to them to allow for an enhancing kind of *Arbeit*. Dirty work, boring work, bad jobs, work and jobs without possibilities of recognition (either through low social status or because the collective is absent or dysfunctional), on the other hand, force the subject into deleterious forms of psychic work. This is, for example, the psychic work required to escape boring work (daydreaming which can only be sustained at the cost of internal absencing, anaesthesia of spirit, drug use, and so on), or the psychic work demanded of dirty work, which leads to a splitting of the personality, between the recognized moral norms and the reality of one's own attitude. Work therefore can certainly lead to the best, but also to the worst, with clear, direct implications for ethical and political life. These implications are studied by Dejours in the second volume of *Travail vivant*, entitled *Travail et émancipation* ("Work and Emancipation").

4. *Travail vivant* (2): Work and Emancipation

The second volume of *Travail vivant* shifts from the metapsychological to the intersubjective, moral and political dimensions. In it Dejours argues for the social, political and cultural centrality of work. In a nutshell, the goal of politics should be to ensure that the social conditions are in place that open the possibility of living work (as opposed to dead or abstract work), because living work is the best way to enable individual emancipation, maintain a cohesive society and make possible the "work of culture". By contrast, the two main adversaries to be combated are the two main forces that actively undermine the emancipatory force of work: on the practical level, political and economic forces that institute forms of dead work and destroy work collectives; on the intellectual level, the general prejudice against work.

a. *Work as Transcendental Experience*

Dejours' claim for the social, political and cultural centrality of work is anchored in a general vision of work and its relation to subjectivity which, in the second volume, is generalized, from the specialized metapsychological perspective to a general philosophical one. The shift is made possible especially thanks to the reference to Michel Henry's philosophy.

The discovery that productive work⁴⁹ requires of the subject a form of "psychic work", and that this work – *Arbeit* is the core mechanism of psychic development is generalized into the following general claim: work is the experience *par excellence* through which subjective life gets in touch with itself, feels itself and can develop henceforth. "Life" then turns out to be the most fundamental concept in Dejours' philosophy. It is taken not in a biological, but in a transcendental sense, following Henry's phenomenology of life. Henry speaks of phenomenological, or "absolute life". The basic idea is that, underneath intentionality, stands a more fundamental condition of any sense-constitution whatsoever, namely the capacity for self-referentiality, the capacity to "be in touch with oneself", or "feel oneself". Without this self-referentiality, intentionality is transcendently impossible. The form of this argument is classical since at least the German idealists, but they spoke rather of self-consciousness. The notion of self-referentiality is more primitive. It points to an affective "familiarity with oneself", before any categorical sense of consciousness. This difference is crucial for Dejours who, as we know, insists on the continuity between the affective and the intellectual.

The regress to subjective life as the radical root of intentionality can be interpreted in different ways. It means first of all that there are forms of proto-intentionality, and thus primitive forms of sense-constitution, in and through organic beings that are not conscious or not conscious in the way of human intelligence. For the human being, the reference to self-referentiality as transcendental ground of consciousness means that intentionality is not limited to categorical consciousness, but involves also and indeed primordially, practical, bodily, meaningful orientation in the world. As the late Husserl, who took increasingly literally the initial metaphor of consciousness as life-stream, already argued, intentionality is rooted in the physical "I can".⁵⁰ Outside of life-phenomenology, Dejours' argument reconnects with another robust phil-

49. Which, as we have just seen, covers reproductive work, care work and service work.

50. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy – Second Book*, R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (trans.) (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 266–93. See in particular #59, "The Ego as subject of faculties", in which Ego-life is no longer "pure" transcendental consciousness, but includes "the fullness of the person", including "the lower psychic layer" as it "extends into the sphere of position-taking" (293).

osophical tradition, namely the naturalist heritage of German idealism, notably Feuerbach, which was the main source of Marx's philosophical world-view. Feuerbach already developed a sophisticated regrounding of the transcendental in the body. He already defined the body as the "supreme *principium metaphysicum*... the ground of the world", that is, as the origin of symbolic function, in rejection of dualistic or intellectualist philosophies.⁵¹

Work for Dejours is central also in this fundamental transcendental sense, as the eminent experience producing self-affection and thus "absolute" (that is, phenomenological) life. Work is the paradigmatic experience through which subjectivity (as "subjective life", as the most basic condition of sense-constitution), by overcoming the challenge of the "real of work", "gets in touch with itself". It thus becomes nothing short of a paradigmatic transcendental experience:

Working is the trial of choice through which subjectivity is revealed to itself. Working is an immanent condition of the manifestation of absolute life.⁵²

Given the transcendental value of the argument, this means that work for Dejours is nothing short of the experience of choice for the discovery not just of subjective truth, but of truth in general. The real of work almost coincides with the real *tout court*. Work is central not just psychologically and socially, but also epistemologically and, we might say, metaphysically. The claim sounds highly improbable especially if work is taken only in its sociological sense, from the perspective of the external organization of labour within society. But if work is taken in the subjective sense, as working, as the effort by a committed body-mind subject, then we can see what the bold claim might mean. Dejours' confronting point for all theorists is that only those truths that have been discovered by facing the challenge of the real (the challenge of obstreperous reality to serious human effort) are worthy of the name. His claim has the great merit of pointing to the danger of frictionless spinning in the void involved in interactionist and inferentialist definitions of truth. Without the prick of the real, we might say, it is easy for language and logic to create castles in the sky that are indeed self-consistent but are in fact mere intellectual constructions. As we will see in a moment, the psychoanalytical perspective is very useful in reminding us that reason is also the capacity of rationalization, where rationalization can be the making rational of what is at core irrational.

51. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Gesammelte Werke* 9, 152.

52. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 2, 31.

b. *Cooperation as a Deontic Activity*

“Life” is not just a basis in terms of knowledge (all knowledge takes its source in an affective encounter with opposing reality), but also in terms of norms. Affective self-familiarity in this case takes on a normative tone, as positive affirmation of the self by itself. Without a sense of self-value, of an affirmation of subjective life by itself, no subsequent judgment of value is possible: so would the transcendental argument go in this case.⁵³ This shift to the normative is obviously crucial to understand how the fundamental vision of subjectivity as “life” grounds Dejours’ social and political theory.

From the perspective of subjective life, the Dejourian criterion applied to politics is thus the following: politics should aim to ensure that the social conditions are in place to make an enhancement of subjective life possible. Bad politics is a politics that is destructive of life. The political centrality of work will issue from the fact that work is a privileged avenue for the enhancement of subjectivity. But how exactly are work, subjectivity and politics related? Emancipated individual life is the goal of politics, but what are the mediations, in work, that make this possible?

The crucial mediation here, according to Dejours, is cooperation. Here, because of the importance of the notion, it is worthwhile going over Dejours’ concept of cooperation briefly once more. The organization of work imposes a certain coordination of tasks. However, just as in the case of the individual task, collective work quickly encounters the resistance of the real. Just like the individual worker, the collective must work at overcoming the gap between the prescribed and the effective realization of the task. In this case, however, creative intelligence is of a different order. Technical, “cunning” intelligence is not sufficient since a collective of different, and indeed, differing, individualities is involved. Over and above technical intelligence and know-how, normative factors have to be mobilized. The workers have to confront their individual ways of dealing with the difficulties of the task. As Dejours shows, because of the gap between the prescription and actual reality of work, very often individual workers develop tricks to circumvent the challenge of the real, which often force them to break some rules and regulations. Anyone involved in real work knows that it is actually impossible to achieve the productive tasks by fully respecting all the abundant regulations framing the working activity. But that makes the necessity to cooperate a dangerous exercise. In order to openly confront individual modes of working, one must minimally have trust in one’s colleagues. Once

53. The argument is powerfully articulated, although independently of Dejours, by Emmanuel Renault, in *L'expérience de l'injustice. Reconnaissance et Clinique de l'injustice* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004), 123–27.

the work process has been decided upon, one must agree to do things in a certain way even if one would prefer to do it differently. Almost always, non-technical considerations come into play: as in the example earlier of the “Siberia” unit in the Mermot plant, the vulnerabilities and special needs of each must be taken into account. Other normative aspects about the external world are also considered, notably ethical and political (increasingly environmental) considerations. In other words, the technical *a priori* coordination of tasks cannot by itself ensure the actuality and quality of production. For that to occur, cooperation must be ensured. But cooperation involves not only technical but also normative dimensions. Paradoxically, therefore, it is Habermas’s communicative theory that offers the best model of cooperation:

the activity of deliberation which leads to the formation of working rules and which makes possible cooperation is a *deontic activity*.⁵⁴

Work was already a political issue in the strict individual sense in which it has been discussed so far, inasmuch as it is, according to Dejours, the role of politics to ensure the possibility of a good maintenance of “subjective life”. In other words, a world in which subjective life is threatened because of the pathologies of work is a world that needs to be changed.

But work is also a political issue, in a more precise sense, inasmuch as it is always also a collective activity, involving cooperation and recognition. At this level, work is political in two new senses. First, as an example, beside the usual notions of polity, of a space where individuals learn to resolve their differences through the use of pragmatic, ethical and moral arguments. Dejours even suggests that the democratic element entailed in deliberation, where reference to the real is the decisive criterion, makes of cooperation a concrete way of challenging domination, since the domination of actual work by the external powers organizing production (management’s orders and clients’ expectations) are rationally challenged in the very name of production. In other words, through cooperation, work is inherently a form of politics, in the same sense as in broader collective discussions.

Second, the deontic dimension of cooperation can also make of it a learning place where individuals practise the civic virtues required in the broader political arena. This, according to Dejours, “explains the extraordinary power of work in terms of socialisation: it makes possible the peaceful cooperation of individual egoisms”.⁵⁵

54. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 2, 81.

55. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 2, 98.

Work therefore is inherently linked to politics, first because cooperation is already a form of political discussion in a pre-political forum, and second as a direct preparation for democratic politics.

Conversely, pathologies of the political provide negative proofs of the political nature of work collectives. As we saw earlier, Dejours explains the rise of social violence, and, later in *Work and Emancipation*, the rise of political disaffection, through the sustained attacks on traditional collectives and working cultures through new work organizations and management methods. His argument, as we saw, is that a general culture of fearful individualism in society arises from the fear learnt in the workplace. The distrust of others as a result of the systematic competition arising from individual evaluation, and worse, the habituation to the other's suffering (those blackmailed into "forced mobility", the pressurized, the bullied, the retrenched, the suicided whose memory is immediately erased), all of these negative affects pervading the modern world of work destroy political capacities at their core.

c. *Barbarism Begins at Work*

The notion of deontic activity is a normative one. It characterizes what is for Dejours the enormous normative potential of healthy workplaces and working relations, a potential extending its virtuous effects well outside the workplace, into families and the polity itself. The other, negative side of that normative potential is the broad social and political impact of pathological work organizations. Dejours adds a further dimension to this critical scenario, considering the civilizing or alternatively, the culturally destructive power of work.

It is not surprising to find this dimension in a thinker for whom the prime reference is Freud. As we know, Freud's social theory is based on his reflections upon the fate of drives caught between the opposing logics of "necessity" (*Ananke*) on the one hand, which forces us to work and which represents one of the main dimensions of the reality principle, and libidinal life on the other hand. For Freud, the tangle between the two forces provides the main explanatory framework to address the question of *Kultur*, that is, of moral progress and whether it is tied to technological, scientific advancement. Freud's answer, as we know, is a pessimistic one: the work of *Kultur* can repress antisocial drives and tame destructive tendencies, but the bloody events of the last century testify to their continuous deleterious presence. As in all other aspects, on this issue as well, Dejours propounds a series of highly controversial and tantalizing theses. He develops his own, highly original theory of the civilizational power of work: the power of work to build *Kultur* or to destroy it.

The first key insight in this respect concerns the essentially ambiguous status of recognition. The metapsychological approach, as we saw, is akin to a transcendental mode of argumentation. It makes the notion of identity the most fundamental one because without identity, that is a sufficiently stable balance achieved between diverging physical and psychic forces, no autonomy is possible. But the essential vulnerability that arises from the difficult necessity to achieve identity means that subjects can easily be tempted to sacrifice other important aspects of their selves to salvage it. Identity is a condition of autonomy, but the achievement of identity can be to the detriment of autonomy. A perverse securing of identity occurs when people seek recognition at all costs, notably at the cost of sacrificing what they would otherwise acknowledge as an important moral value. This is what occurs for instance when inclusion in a work collective indeed provides the important psychic resources of recognition, but through the exclusion and/or mistreatment of others inside or outside the collective. The thirst for recognition can lead to the worst.

the inability to confront solitude and to endure the absence of recognition is a form of vulnerability that risks making of the individual a liege, a subjected being and an opportunist ready to betray moral sense and values to avoid psychic destabilisation and fear. The fear of solitude...might well be the main psychic spring of voluntary servitude and the disposition to take part in evil.⁵⁶

Dejours reads contemporary moral psychology, notably theories of autonomy following the work of Harry Frankfurt, as an articulation in philosophical terms of his proposed metapsychological theory of identity.⁵⁷ Autonomy, from his neo-Freudian perspective, is a difficult achievement whereby the subject has learnt to liberate herself/himself from the compulsive force of libidinal demands. That is why emancipation for Dejours is a strictly individual concept, and indeed an elitist one. According to him, few people have a sufficiently strong identity that makes them capable of accepting the sacrifice of drive satisfaction, find derived satisfaction in sublimated forms, and face challenges to their identity construct. Once they have reached that stage where they can “renounce the drives” (as opposed to merely repressing

56. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 2, 120.

57. See his contribution to a collective volume dedicated to contemporary theories of autonomy, “Entre inégalités individuelles et coopération collective: la question de l’autorité”, in Marlène Jouan and Sandra Laugier (eds), *Comment penser l’autonomie ? Entre compétences et dépendances* (Paris: PUF, 2009), 291–313.

them), they are freed from the self-alienation imposed by them upon themselves. This stage, however, is also the one where they are able to acknowledge the other's subjectivity and make room for its own demands. Hence the intimate link between autonomy and moral sense in Dejours, as in much of contemporary moral psychology.

By contrast, individuals threatened by the fear of non-recognition, which risks undermining their psychic balance (their identity), are easily convinced to bracket out their moral sense, or indeed, as Freud famously analysed in "Group Psychology and Ego Analysis", are easily mobilized into an "inorganised mass" in which free independent thinking is lifted, and regressive forms of thinking and acting develop. This kind of mechanism all the more easily unfolds since there exists a fundamental form of pleasure derived from cruelty to others. In this case, a perverse form of recognition combines with the sexual excitement provided by cruelty.

Given the normative and negative models of the work collective just mentioned, the link Dejours establishes between autonomy, moral sense and cooperation is easy to fathom. As we just saw, cooperation at work is for Dejours the paradigmatic example of a form of interaction in which "egoisms", that is, the dependence of each individual on their own needs, can be pacified and made to coexist, indeed, where a form of thought can develop which overcomes the tyranny of drive satisfaction. In this case, work-*poiesis*, through cooperation, enables the work-*Arbeit* of sublimation, which leads to the interrelated logics of ethical recognition of the other, renouncement of the drives and development of independent thought. By contrast, pathological workplaces and work relations encourage regressive forms of thought, anaesthetize moral sense and can lead to the worst form of cruelty towards others. In this case, the work-*Arbeit* of individual emancipation itself regresses. Instead of developing subjective life, individuals develop rigid or stunted forms of identity:

it takes an endless struggle to set up strong links between work, cooperation and life, that is, inscribe work in the process of culture. For it is very easy, as we know, to unite the first two terms – work and cooperation – and make them act against life. (...) By contrast, the struggle to maintain the links between work, cooperation and life is one of the ways to combat the descent into barbarism. However, in order to be effective and rational, this struggle demands collective vigilance, a vigilance that can only be obtained if its ends and means are supported in the public arena by a strong political thought.⁵⁸

58. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 2, 153.

It is clear that Dejours offers here his own interpretation of the banality of evil and voluntary servitude, two of the most burning issues of modern politics. His suggestion is that it takes the power of strong work collectives, supported in the political arena outside of work, to bind the destructive power of fearful identities. Conversely, he suggests that the angst of destabilization, fanned by a culture of fear, and made worse by the appeal to cruelty on the part of dangerous demagogues, can spread quickly from work to society and lead to barbarism. It is striking to note once again how Dejours' implicit diagnosis of the horrors of the last century, and his political proposal to pre-empt their repetition, via the pacifying power of work, is the exact opposite of Marcuse's own diagnosis, despite their otherwise strongly overlapping methods of marrying Freudian with Marxian themes.

d. *Work and Emancipation*

We can conclude by briefly sketching the image of individual and collective emancipation which finally emerges from Dejours' social theoretical explorations. As just said, emancipation, on his neo-Freudian perspective, is at first only individual. It is primarily a form of self-liberation, a liberation from the alienation to the subconscious we formed as a child and which continues to bind us in the later stages of life. Emancipation, however, is also resistance to the many challenges stemming from our dependence upon others, notably the dominations that structure social relations (especially through work and gender difference) and the dependence resulting from our craving for recognition. Because he takes seriously the idea that the path to emancipation is a form of work (psychic work, *Arbeit*, *praxis* as self-*poiesis*), Dejours makes the bold claim that productive, socially defined work (*poiesis*) is the avenue of choice for individual emancipation. In the final two chapters of the book, Dejours recapitulates his grand anthropological vision of the formative power of work, first for subjects, but also for culture, in the most eminent sense of the term:

the confrontation to the resistance of the real first gives birth to the subjective, affective experience of failure, which undoes (the psychic construct) (...). The mobilisation of corporeal intelligence opens a path where the challenge to re-establish subjectivity is sought in per-laboration, that is a restructuring of psychic identity through thinking. The mechanism of free effort is tied to drive sublimation and rejoicing (*ré-jouissance*), that is, a secondary form of *jouissance*, one that is

acquired post the effort and as a result of the voluptuousness (*volupté*) felt by a self sensing its own increase.⁵⁹

The product of this individual act of self-enhancement, however, is a creation that can be witnessed and, as the case may be, enjoyed by others. What others witness is not simply the concrete output of work, but an example of human action leading to creative self-enhancement, that is to say, to an increase in subjective life. Work enjoyed, work well done act as powerful examples to others, showing the possibility to “honour” life, rather than force it to regress or to destroy it. The works of culture matter just as much as illustrations of the power of subjective life to transcend itself, as for their inherent content. The pleasure in enjoying the works of culture is pleasure in joining in communal forms of life that are productive and not (self-)destructive:

What from the subjective point of view is a form of sublimation (...) leaves a remainder in the world, made concrete via the quality of the work done. We can interpret Freud’s notion of *Kulturarbeit* in this sense. *Kulturarbeit* is a form that is both ordinary in everyday life and extraordinary in terms of what it involves, in which is expressed the power of work to honour life. *Kulturarbeit* designates the movement by which the subjective self-challenge, in which life embraces and enhances itself via the mediation of the real of work, overflows both the self and the real, and becomes hypostasised in the form of works and beyond that, in culture. *Kulturarbeit* designates quite precisely the successful fusion of work and life.⁶⁰

Dejours’ philosophical vision will probably leave many readers sceptical. For a start, many of his claims and arguments, and the way in which he justifies them, are squarely at odds with current mainstream approaches in philosophy and the social sciences, for instance his approach to politics through the concept of life, or his analysis of social pathologies via the transformations of work collectives. Professionalized academic philosophy, the social sciences aiming to adopt the austerity of the natural sciences, and established paradigms in the humanities, are simply not used to hearing the kinds of claims put forward by Dejours. Some readers might also think that there is a logical mistake at the heart of his conclusions. These readers might argue that local analyses about normative aspects of work experiences

59. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 2, 158.

60. Dejours, *Travail vivant*, Vol. 2, 158.

are unduly generalized into general claims about normativity in general. Altogether, Dejours' radical claim about the multidimensional centrality of work (psychological, epistemic, social, moral, political, cultural) is not only difficult to sustain in its radical extension in and of itself; it is definitely a most unexpected claim to make in the current intellectual landscape.

On the surface, the most worrying criticism would be the accusation of paralogism: that there are unjustified logical shifts in Dejours' arguments, from the "local" normativity of work to general claims about normativity in general. This criticism however is easily warded off. Undeniably, there are a few passages in *Travail vivant* where the shift from work normativity to general normativity could be more strongly justified. But Dejours is also very clear in many other passages that work is only one experience, if, for him, the experience of choice, that enables the kind of self-emancipation that is necessary to open the way to normative life, either in individual moral life or in politics.

As for the second kind of criticism, the accusation of being at odds with accepted methodologies and of defying theoretical prohibitions, it is easily turned around. This is in fact where many other readers will see the great value of Dejours' psychodynamic approach. On a number of key points, which this review has attempted to identify, his approach shines a new, original light or rather retrieves in original fashion some strong, but repressed, undercurrents of modern philosophy. The psychodynamics of work is not just invaluable for the most obvious reason, namely for reminding us of the constitutive importance of work for many (most?) individuals and communities today still, a fact that moral and political philosophy has overlooked for too long. Nor is the psychodynamics of work invaluable only for the alternative analyses it puts forward on social issues such as the new forms of social violence or the rise of depoliticization. The psychodynamics of work is also invaluable for the more general philosophical vision that is now articulated in the two books of *Travail vivant*, and for the strong philosophical points that emerge from this vision: in particular, to name but a few, the indissoluble unity of body and mind; the corporeal origins and nature of cognition; the normative ambiguity of recognition; the eminent place of work in the formation of gender roles; the fragility of moral and cultural progress.

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